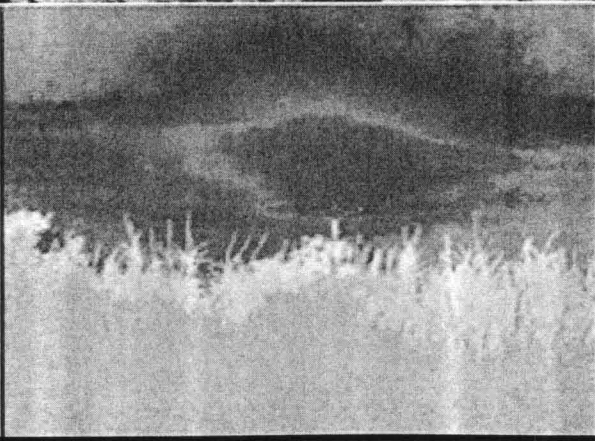
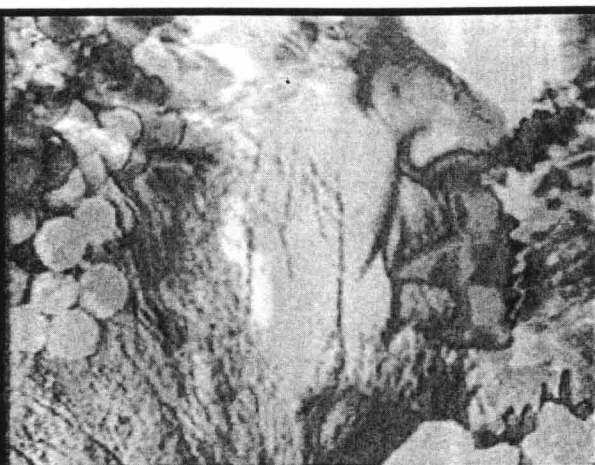
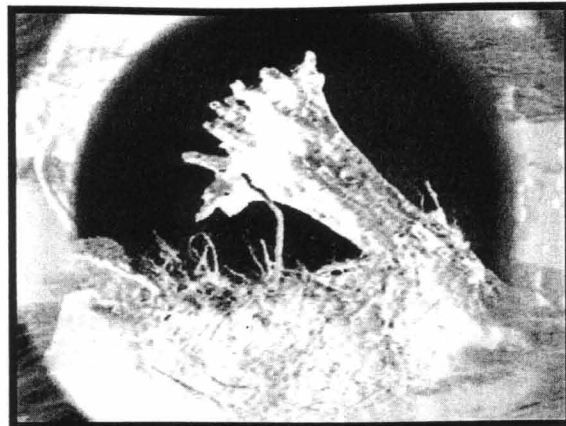
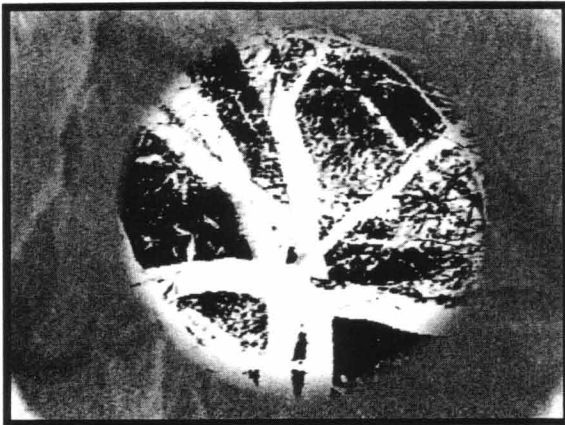
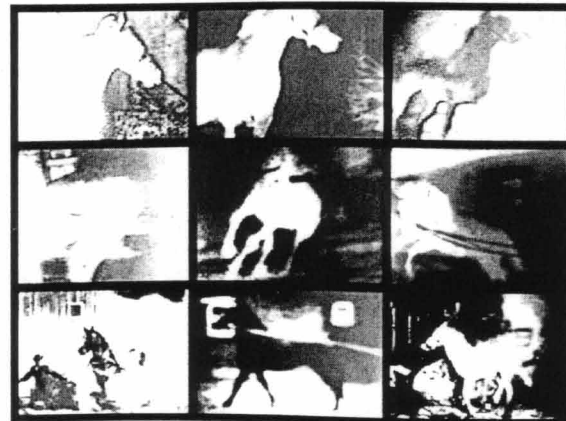


# FLASHBACKS



Top:  
*Even the Cyclops Pay the Ferryman* (1998-)  
centre:  
*Chronos Fragmented* (1995) bottom:  
*Et in Arcadia Ego* from  
*Sketches for a Sensual Philosophy* (1988)  
*Berlin Horse* (1970)



# Improvising time and image

**Malcolm LeGrice** or the importance of avant-garde film and video practice in the UK

**W**e forget and remake our memories to suit our self image and psyche but as I recall I always wanted to paint and draw. My family was maverick working class – no inherited wealth but also not political.

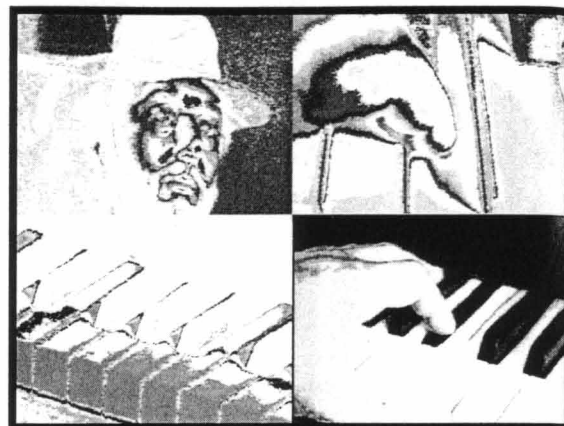
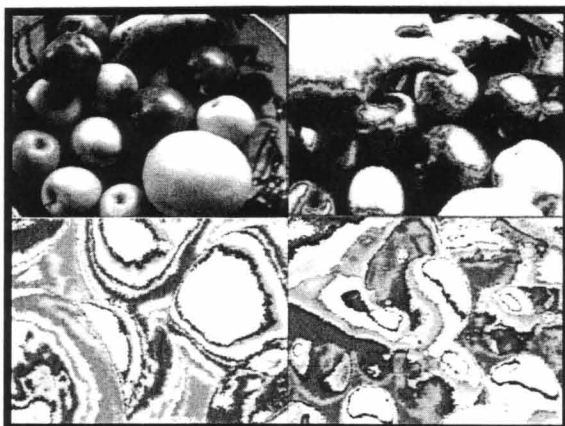
They loved theatre and took me as a child every week to the Palace Theatre, Plymouth, whatever played, from the Follies Bergeres to *La Traviata*. Father played the piano and the accordion and mother sang and danced in concert parties. I also had small parts in amateur theatricals until my teens. When I was about ten – around 1950 – on an impulse where money comes and goes, my father bought a 9.5mm movie camera and hand cranked projector. We rented reels of Chaplin, Laurel and Hardy, Mickey Mouse and Keaton and had extended family evenings – uncles, aunts, cousins – looking at that weekend's batch of films and the black and white home movies my father shot on our trips to Dartmoor or the beach. It was my job to run the projector – I think I was the only one who knew how it worked. We ran the films forward but then ran them again backwards – we saw Popeye's biceps deflate then take spinach from his mouth and stuff it back into the can. I discovered the freeze frame when the centre sprocket hole of 9.5mm tore and the film stuck in the gate. The lamp was so dim that it took a long time to burn the frame. One of the home movies where this impromptu freeze happened became the material I made into *Little Dog For Roger* in 1967.

As a child I had piano lessons but had no patience to read the music. In my early teens I wore a Brandoesque white tie and dark shirt and like others of my generation discovered Rock and Roll mainly through Bill Haley and *Rock Around the Clock*. I sided with Little Richard and Fats Domino over Elvis – I had no notion then of white singers stealing black music – I just liked the music better. This discovery of Rock and Roll led me quickly to Louis Armstrong and New Orleans Jazz. I went to Art School in Plymouth, worked a summer as a bus conductor and bought a second hand Ivor Mairants Zenith guitar, met up with other jazz enthusiasts in the town including John Surmon, Mike Westbrook, Rod Mason and Keith Rowe – all of whom continue to perform and record. I learned the guitar 'on-the-job' with bands playing in local clubs. Though I still play most days, I have never been a talented musician. Where my hand and eye

seemed nicely wired together, my ear and fingers lacked some necessary synapses. However, I think jazz, rooted in improvisation, has been the single most important influence on my concepts of artistic form. After my seventh year at Art School, frustrated with the gallery scene in painting and caught up with the sense of radical change in the mid sixties, I started to make film. This combined the visual aspect of painting, my early pleasure in theatre and the temporal excitement of music.

I made my first film experiments in Standard 8mm in 1965 and I still treat one of these, a still life piece called *China Tea*, as part of my 'Filmography'. This was shot in extreme close-up with two cameras moving between black Chinese cups and tea pot on a white table cloth and is accompanied in projection by a music tape I made by plucking thin sticks jammed into piano strings. If I had known the term then I would have called this 'prepared-piano'. I came to film as a complete primitive. As a painting student at the Slade I had been to some of the presentations made by Thorold Dickenson which included a wild work, *A History of Nothing*, by Eduardo Paolozzi, the nearest I came to an avant-garde film. Though I had seen all the contemporary films of Resnais, Truffaut, Fellini and Godard. I had no desire to make films for the cinema – even Godard looked old hat compared to what I understood as radical art – Robert Rauschenberg, Ornette Coleman, John Cage. I started to make films in the same way I approached painting or improvisational music. I never used a 'script'. For some films, like *Castle 2* or *Talla*, to guide the editing, I made diagrams similar to the graphic scores developed by Cardew or Cage. Mostly though, I just started working without any preconceptions – shooting, collecting found-footage, printing, re-printing, re-shooting from the screen, editing, looping then re-editing. It was a process closer to jazz or the way a painting emerged from the images and 'action' than any traditional approach to film.

My earliest influences as a filmmaker came from: painting – Monet through Cubism to Jackson Pollock and Jasper Johns; music – Debussy through Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington, Dizzy Gillespie to Ornette Coleman; theatre – Berthold Brecht, but mainly Samuel Beckett; literature – James Joyce but particularly Franz Kafka – obliquely the



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*Castle* reference of the two *Castle* films and the *K* of the recent video, *For the Benefit of Mr K*. I never drew on traditional cinema and after becoming aware of experimental film I viewed any relationship as shared aesthetic territory rather than ‘influence’.

I was initially unaware of the American Underground film. My first 16mm film *Castle One* (1966), was mainly made with footage found in the garbage cans in Soho which I edited together with film I shot of a flashing electric light bulb. I projected the film with an actual flashing bulb hanging in front of the screen. This aggressive, quasi-dada device, periodically bleached-out the film image completely, illuminated the audience but also made the distinction between the real bulb and its image a part of the work. I ran the film for David Curtis, then setting up the Arts Lab Cinema in Drury Lane. He then showed me *A Movie* by Bruce Connor – because of the found footage connection – and introduced me to other work from the USA. After this David programmed *Castle One* and my other films at the Arts Lab. Because I was already sharing my enthusiasm for film as an art medium with students like Roger Ackling at Saint Martin’s, I decided I needed to be a scholar as well as make films and began researching and writing about the history of experimental film.

To some extent I became an historian and theorist by default – little was known of experimental film in the UK and there was absolutely no context for film as experimental art. A filmmaking ‘scene’ began to emerge around the Arts Lab and the London Film Makers’ Cooperative and at Saint Martin’s School of Art largely stimulated by me and John Latham before he was scandalously sacked ‘chewing-over’ Clement Greenberg – a long story. My contribution to this scene stemmed mainly from conceiving – with David Curtis – the idea of a filmmakers workshop with printing, developing as well as editing facilities. After building my own film printer and processing machine – used in my early work – I set up the Co-op workshop with secondhand professional equipment following the merger of Arts Lab and Co-op.

For my own filmmaking, the desire to have access to production equipment was driven by two factors: the need

to cut the cost of filmmaking – essential then to the emergence of an independent cinema; and to reproduce the direct relationship to the medium I took for granted in painting and music. *Berlin Horse* (1970), with an original soundtrack by Brian Eno, is a good example of a film completely developed through a ‘hands-on’ approach to filmmaking. It was made mixing some re-filmed 8mm footage of a horse being exercised in Germany with a bit of found, early newsreel of horses being led from a burning barn. Making loops of the material I printed it with various superimpositions of negative and positive and colour filters on the old Debie printer at the Coop. The images and concepts emerged from a continuous improvisation – responding to short looping sequences – then deciding what to do next – over and over until I liked the result.

During the late sixties and early seventies I became ‘known’ as a filmmaker but I had not simply switched from one medium to another. My shift away from painting was broader than that. In general I was drawn by time-based forms of art and by the possibilities of new technologies. Through my contact with guitarist Keith Rowe, I did a few performances of sound and light devices with AMM – then including Cornelius Cardew – at a short lived gallery in Kingley Street. I did a series of video installations in ‘Drama in a Wide Media Environment’ at the Drury Lane Arts Lab in 1968, joined the Computer Art Society and did a computer-text performance at ‘Event One’ in 1969. I then produced a very short computer film on the Atlas computer at the Atomic Energy Establishment – a piece of film I incorporated into *How to Screw the CIA - Reign of the Vampire* in 1971.

From the beginning of my film-work I concentrated on multi-projection and a combination of live performance with projection – I made only a few conventional single screen films. The multi-projection work began at the Arts Lab, was included as an afterthought in the famous Gallery House Survey of the Avant Garde in 1972 and featured at the Liverpool Walker Art Gallery in ‘Filmaktion’ in 1973. In works like *Matrix* and *Gross Fog* (both 1972) I often stood behind a bank of up to six loop projectors and gradually reconfigured the relationships, zoom and superimposition.

When I redid this work for 'Live In Your Head' at the Whitechapel last year someone described me as a film disc-jockey. The works often involved live readings – *Pre-production* (1972) – or shadow performances as in *Horror Film 1* (1971) where I move progressively backwards casting a larger and larger shadow from three colour loop projections timing my actions to a tape of breathing. This piece, also initially an improvisation, became quite strictly choreographed with particular shadow actions related to the screen size and frame edge at each distance. Thirty years ago I normally did this naked but now only venture to remove my shirt – when I did it at the Whitechapel show I decided I should soon need to train a stand in.

Until the early eighties I concentrated on filmmaking but also campaigned for the importance of film-art in both cinema and gallery contexts. I also became involved in a polemic to draw attention to European experimental film against the critical dominance of the USA. In the late 1960s Europe as a political entity was a long way off. Added to the clear economic supremacy of the USA, American art and culture was being aggressively promoted by national agencies like the United States Information Service (USIS) strongly rumoured to be an arm of the CIA – thus *How to Screw the CIA* – and all this in the context of the Vietnam War. Even British critics like Simon Field gave more attention to the 'New American Cinema' than to British or other European experimental film. Together with Peter Gidal and Birgit and Wilhelm Hein in Germany, I wanted to redress the balance and stimulate interest in work made outside the USA. What complicated the polemical stance was my ambivalent strong interest in Brakhage, Frampton, Sharits, Conrad and Snow (Canadian but part of the New American Cinema), counteracted by some genuine underlying ideological and aesthetic differences. American work remained romantically individualist, promoted as such and consistent with the dominant American 'frontier' ideology. British work was more 'collective', admitting inter-influence between artists and consistent with a more socialist tradition. The power relationships amplified differences into oppositions which were often overstated.

Despite the deep involvement in film politics, and my stress on film as a medium, I was never a film purist. My concentration on the material characteristics of film did not involve an opposition to other technologies and media. I experimented with video in the late 1960s but until the arrival of Video8, a low cost, reliable and good resolution colour video system, I found the video medium lacked the reliability, control and seduction of film. Similarly, I did not follow up my early interest in computers until the arrival of the PC. In my case this was the Atari, a cheap, fast, easily programmable computer, designed to handle images with the bonus of built-in (MIDI) music capability. Until then working with computers had been slow and frustrating.

In the mid 1970s I began to reconsider 'representational' cinema. I became particularly interested in how the camera could stand for the subjective or filmmaker's viewpoint and with the way a spectator constructed a scene or narrative from viewpoint fragments. This started with *After Lumiere - l'Arroseur Arrose* a remake of the famous hose-pipe joke which I shot in four different ways and then with *After Manet - le Dejeuner sur l'Herb* (1975), a four camera, four projector work based on Manet's picnic. I was also drawn into the debate around semiology, deconstruction, feminism

and took up the idea that I could treat narrative as a problematic issue within film language itself. I made a trilogy of feature length, single screen films which experimented with narrative or multi-narrative constructions at the same time concentrating on domestic relationships. The first of the trilogy, *Blackbird Descending - Tense Alignment* (1977) explored this problem through simple domestic activities: answering the "phone; making coffee; pruning a tree; washing clothes – the maid was in the garden hanging out the clothes when down came a blackbird and pecked off her nose". The two hour film was constructed from continuous ten minute takes each shot from a space occupied by one of the characters. The spectator constructed the narrative from these different viewpoints of a repeated set of events. The second and third films, *Emily - Third Party Speculation* (1979) and *Finnegans Chin - Temporal Economy* (1981) later screened on Channel Four, took these ideas further. They were paralleled by a group of articles on the way the spectator is 'placed' by the camera in film, the structures of 'identification' and the psychological 'economies' of viewpoint and montage. In retrospect, the theoretical work remains relevant and the films do open up, in the film-language itself, an equivalent to question, argument and a problematic discourse. However, this period left me with an artistic crisis. I had a sense that the work had taken a direction which did not sustain me as my earlier experimental films had.

The crisis was solved initially by a return to drawing - punk faces in a style between Picasso and Matisse and eventually a return to the more improvisational, visual and sound experiments which had fuelled work like *Berlin Horse* only this time round using video and the computer rather than film.

While I can view my earlier work with some objectivity, the more recent period of video and computer work is possibly too close not to risk some oversimplification – but I shall have a go.

The video work is almost completely based around a 'diary' which began, using Video8, in May 1988 and continues now on DVC. The images I make with the camera are done with no preconception about their subsequent use – though on occasions I have taken off on some 'situations' or images in the viewfinder and explored them knowing they could become the centre of a later work. The video sequences lie dormant as 'memories' and are re-awakened and transformed in a selection and editing process. They are 'raw-material' which, in the secondary process of making works become changed in meaning. They are fragments of recorded 'reality' which become symbolic, or allegorical through editing, superimposition and image transformation. Each raw sequence has a potential for meaning or interpretation which is hidden by its obvious link to its original autobiographical place. Changing the context of a sequence draws out latent meanings, unconscious or simply newly created interpretations which I have likened to the way we change our understandings through memory and dream. The video diary has resulted in a series of short videos lasting anything from one to fifteen minutes – 'poems' or 'songs' exploring the content of the images and, in some works, including electronic or digital transformation. I began this process with the Channel Four, *Sketches for a Sensual Philosophy*, completed in 1988 which was made up of nine short pieces, each with its own title, conceived like tracks on a music album. Another series, with the general title *Trials*

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*and Tribulations*, has been screened very little in the UK. It includes titles like: *Prelude* (1993) – intercutting fragments of piano playing with a plate of oysters; *Warsaw Window* (1994) – a simple ‘document’ shot, as the title suggests, from a window in Warsaw; or *For the Benefit of Mr. K* (1995) – dissolving in and out of a sepia postcard of the house where Kafka wrote *The Trial* and video of the street I shot from the same viewpoint. These stem from a response to the images and last for however long I feel the experience is sustained – there is no ‘big-idea’ or unifying concept in this series.

A longer work, *Chronos Fragmented* (Channel Four, 1997 but completed in 1995), takes the fragments of video ‘memory’ from the diary, and tries to mould them into larger scale metaphors. Despite broad, elemental unifying themes like the rotation of seasons, the video remains episodic and includes reference to political realities like the break up of Yugoslavia and images of Hong Kong set against sequences shot in remote parts of China.

In 1990 I published the first of a series of articles which examined the implication of digital concepts for cinema as a language and practice. In continental Europe, non-linearity and the digital became a hot subject and my attempt to relate the emerging notions of non-linear structures to the history of experimental cinema found many echoes. My computer work has resulted in some art-pieces presented directly from the computer, as I did in an improvised music performance with Keith Rowe at the Film Co-op in December 1989. Mainly the computer works have been recorded as part of video productions. For example, in *Arbitrary Logic* (video version 1988), I explored the synthetic generation of colour, image or sound from ‘mathematical’ principles and in *Digital Still Life* (video version 1988), the digital transformation of video images. In each of these works the digital values created by the programme I had written controlled the transformations in colour, movement and image sequence, but also the generation of the sound. However, related to the video diary, I have also written programmes to select and pre-edit video sequences based on semantic, symbolic or abstract qualities identified in the initial material. This was mainly explored in the development of *Chronos Fragmented* and has been carried on in the *Cyclops Cycle* a multi-projection video work started in 1998 and continuing.

My published work on digital ‘media’ speculates beyond the cinema or video forms and includes issues related to interactivity and remote, collective art-forms using the Internet. Except for the simple interactivity in *Arbitrary Logic*, which was initially performed live as a colour/field and music synthesizer, I have not made any fully interactive works. In the same way in which I postponed working with computers until a certain stage in the technology, I do not expect to take up interactive forms until they can satisfy

the level of sequence control, immersiveness, scale, pace and symbolic richness of the film or video presentation. However the interactive ‘performative’ condition of the spectator has been implicit (and sometimes explicit) in the form of my work from the earliest films. It is there, for example, in the relationship between screens in the multi-projector work. Here each screening is distinct through small difference in synchronization and screen configuration and the form itself forces the spectator constantly to make choices of attention between the screens. It is there also in an implied ‘provisionality’ of structure through formal devices like partial repetition and superimposition suggesting that the work being seen is not definitive – that the relationships between images could be different and might be ‘reworked’. In other words, non-linearity and an interactive concept is there in the work at a symbolic level even if the spectator cannot interact to change the actual sequence of presentation. In some ways, the actual manipulations which take place in fully interactive works can be a decoy. They can create an illusion of empowerment whilst the fundamental artistic control still exists elsewhere. The apparent ‘effectiveness’ of the ‘user’ can mask the way in which the interactive ‘game’ itself is another part of a symbolic language – art is always conducted in the arena of the symbolic however abstract, physical or interactive.

As well as some involvement in interactive forms, I have also been tempted by gallery installation since the early multi-projection films. However, I have largely rejected this form because of the transience of the viewers engagement and consequent lack of depth in time-based art in the gallery. This lack of sustained attention and duration veers work towards concept and idea rather than engaged experience. Though I continue to resist the limiting unification of narrative, the dramaturgy of a work unfolding across time has ultimately proved to be the most alluring quality of cinema. But a dramatic unfolding can be abstract as well as semiotic and may have more to do with musical form than narrative. In cinematic time there is a complex interplay between present perception, memory and expectation. This process is a kind of ‘layering’ of symbolic events across time structured through memory and the cyclic, rhythmic resonances of the spectator. Such an experience is not possible without an immersive, captive duration – it does not happen in the fleeting attention given to a work we pass in a gallery. The convention of cinema, shared with theatre, that the spectator (collectively the audience) gives time – invests a short period of life – to an unfolding event is essential to my artistic desires. I am dissatisfied by an art of concept and idea which has its completion in understanding. Instead I remain engaged in presence and experience coupled with a fascination for a ‘language’ of symbolic latency and uncertainty.

**Malcolm Le Grice**



*The Castle 2*